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FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8726

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000505

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FOR NEA/ARP, G/IWI

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KWMN KU

SUBJECT: FEMALE LEADERS PAINT BLEAK PICTURE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS FOR CONGRESSWOMAN SANCHEZ

REF: KUWAIT 489

Sensitive But Unclassified; Not for Internet Distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Members of the Women's Network (WIN) told Representative Loretta Sanchez (D-CA) on April 7 that women still face major professional, political, and legal obstacles to achieving equality with men in Kuwait. Some of the problems come from discrimination in the workplace. Others come from women themselves, who often oppose greater roles for women in the public sphere. The women attributed a deterioration in their rights over the past several decades to the rise of an intolerant form of Islam. The activists also mentioned Kuwaiti women's history of self-reliance and described their plans to reassert their role in society through media campaigns, entrepreneurship and leadership training. Sanchez said women in the U.S. face similar problems to those described by the Kuwaiti women. She talked about Nancy Pelosi's rise to Speaker of the House, citing it as an example of how difficult it is for women to break gender barriers but as an example of what can be achieved through hard work. End Summary.

Activists Say Women Face Major Problems

¶2. (SBU) Members of the Women's Network (aka "Women in Network" or WIN) told Representative Loretta Sanchez (D-CA) on April 7 that women face major professional, political, and legal obstacles to achieving equality with men. Secretary General of WIN Dr. Fatima Al-Abdali, whose day job is Director of the Health, Safety and Environment Group at Kuwait Oil Company, described a recent session she held with women engineers in the early stages of their career. All the women said they were discriminated against in terms of promotions and evaluation. A younger member of WIN chimed in that women have to work twice as hard as men because they need to constantly prove themselves as well as manage their families.

¶3. (SBU) Dr. Rola Dashti, a prominent women's activist and head of the Kuwait Economic Society (KES), added that KES studies on voter attitudes suggested that large percentages of women either opposed outright or did not actively support the election of women to parliament. Maryam Bushehri, the office director for independent MP Marzouq Al-Ghanim, noted that during door-to-door election campaigning in 2006, she found that women even in rich, well-educated areas thought women should be staying home rather than working.

¶4. (SBU) Several of the participants pointed out that in the 1960s and 1970s Kuwaiti women enjoyed more equality than today. Layla Al-Awadhi, an activist in her late fifties dressed in very conservative Islamic dress, attributed the deterioration in women's equality to an intolerant, extremist form of Islam that has swept Kuwait. Nadia Al-Harbi agreed,

noting that men cast tribal, anti-women policies in Islamic terms, and people are afraid to be seen as criticizing Islam. Dr. Al-Abdali added that women's lack of political awareness at the grassroots level was a major barrier to their advancement politically and socially. Dr. Dashti summed up matters by telling Representative Sanchez that women were fighting to create a major ideological break in Kuwaiti society by convincing people that women can participate in the public sphere.

Positive Signs and Active Steps

¶15. (SBU) The activists told Congresswoman Sanchez that there were positive signs as well. They pointed to a woman running for the board of the local cooperative society in Jahra, Kuwait's most socially conservative area, as something that would have been unthinkable previously. Lawyer Najla Al-Nakki noted that Kuwaiti women have a history of self-reliance that goes back to the time when Kuwaiti men would leave for months at a time as sailors or pearl-divers. She sees it as a matter of time before women regain their assertiveness.

¶16. (SBU) WIN members also noted their efforts to redress these problems, including through their cooperation with MEPI to build an advocacy campaign for a women's quota in the parliament (reftel), which they refer to as the "Partnership Law." Bushehri is organizing a campaign to encourage women to be entrepreneurs. Layla Al-Sarraf, a younger member of WIN who writes for the Al-Qabas Arabic daily, is working on media advocacy campaigns for women. Dr. Dashti said she wanted to create a women's political institute to churn out several dozen well-qualified women politicians each year who

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have solid media skills, knowledge of the issues, and understanding of how to organize a campaign.

¶17. (SBU) Dr. Dashti concluded by saying the efforts by the U.S. and other international bodies to promote democratization had been a crucial element in women winning their political rights. She worried that perhaps the will to promote democracy abroad was waning given the difficult situation in Iraq, and asked Representative Sanchez if the U.S. was committed to continued support of democracy efforts. Sanchez responded that in principle there was support for democratization, but said she was pessimistic because the enormous current budget deficits meant that spending cuts were inevitable. She predicted that military and security spending would not be reduced, leaving "extras" such as democracy promotion vulnerable.

Sanchez: Power is Taken, Not Given

¶18. (SBU) Representative Sanchez argued that the problems Kuwaiti women faced were the same as those faced by American women, especially the fact that women doubt their abilities to assume leadership positions. She advised the women to build a "machine" that could channel their political aspirations into action, because no one would ever give power to the women; women had to take power through hard work. She talked about the rise of Nancy Pelosi to the position of Speaker of the House, noting that it required breaking ideological barriers to women assuming leadership and nearly a year of tough political work.

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